

Jerry's Kids : Young Deadheads aren't in it for the nostalgia. They love the positive energy the band brings to its shows these days. - Los Angeles Times

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My sister was a teen-age Deadhead.

In high school, she got a Super 8 camera to document the parking lot frolic at the Grateful Dead concerts she followed. Her rattling footage of Shakedown Street, the makeshift drag formed to sell and barter everything from T-shirts to baked goods (and named, as most things in this scene, after a song) would then serve as entertainment, along with our latest paintings or piano exercise, at the next family gathering.

In retrospect, much of what now defines sis evolved during those days of the Dead. She approached things with an open affection that seemed almost out of place in the '80s. She was always "loving life," a favored phrase among Deadheads, with a wide-eyed enthusiasm that led her to taking up guitar, songwriting and vegetarianism. She became the quintessential longhaired, hairy-legged hippie chick in our crowd.

Katie McCartney of Irvine reminds me of my little sis.

There's the way she busies her hands by twisting a silver ring around a toe peeking out of her suede Birkenstock sandals. Unlike most of her peers, the Mater Dei senior eschews makeup, curling irons or other beauty tricks, relying instead on her granola good looks.

Her face lights up even more when she talks about a scene that she's been digging ever since seventh grade.

It's a scene that had been thriving long before Katie, now 17, was even born.

More than any other rock band, the Grateful Dead have cultivated the ultimate loyal following. Some fans, or Deadheads as they're known, tuck a sleep roll under their arm, a couple of bucks in their pockets and accompany the band as it tours the country from stadium to arena. Others join the parking lot camp-out for the night when it visits their town.

On the road or nestled in suburbia, the "deadicated" have developed customs, beliefs, lingo and a host of signs they continue to share collectively.

But the most fascinating aspect of this "phenomenon," says Dennis McNally, the Grateful Dead's publicist for the last 10 years and a Deadhead since the beginning, "is the constant renewal of the audience. You look at the front rows at every show and there have been 16- to 25-year-olds up there for the last 30 years."

For the thousands of teens like Katie who “get on the bus” every year, being a Deadhead is not about reviving nostalgia but about an evolving culture that, like the music, teems with life at every live show. Deadheads--even the young ones--come away from these celebrations filled with the faith that people are inherently good, thoughtful of the meaning of existence and open to the possibilities of the universe.

“It’s no fan club. It’s more a way of life, a way of thought,” wrote David Shenk in “Skeleton Key: A Dictionary for Deadheads,” (Doubleday, 1994), a book he co-authored with Steve Silberman that attempts to outline the culture and its lexicon.

As a lifestyle--say Katie, my sister, and others who’ve turned on during their developing teen years--the Grateful Dead’s music has served as a vehicle for intellectual awakening. Deadheads seem more willing to talk about their feelings or their theories of reality--not the average teen talk.

Outsiders have long labeled the mystical imagery, mellow music and hippie tokens as some kind of perpetual psychedelic flashback. And for some Deadheads it still is.

Psychedelia such as LSD and mushrooms are still very much a part of the Dead scene, as is the ever-present aroma of marijuana. The Grateful Dead emerged from the infamous Bay Area Acid Tests hosted by Ken Kesey, who later chronicled them in his novel, the “Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test.”

But not everyone in this Just Say No era considers drugs essential to getting high at a Dead show. Some reach an altered state naturally by spinning to the music. Then there are the Wharf Rats, a group of 12-steppers and sober Deadheads who preach from an official table set up for them by the band at the concerts and target leaflets at the younger generation.

Ironically, some veteran fans dislike the younger Deadheads because they think they’re only into it for the drugs, an attitude Katie and her friend disagree with.

“There’s always a crabby” old-timer, McNally says, “but in general, Deadheads welcome everybody.”

*It was on a visit home by her older sister from Cal State Chico that Katie inherited her first bootleg Grateful Dead tape. Most of these bootleg cassettes are exchanged for free because Deadheads believe that selling them is bad karma.

The band lets the taping happen; in fact, fan taping sections using the latest DAT equipment are set aside at the concerts. As one of the largest moneymaking enterprises in rock ‘n’ roll, the Grateful Dead view the exchange as an integral part of the culture that has flourished around it since making the Haight-Ashbury scene in 1966.

Katie got to see the Jerry Garcia Band (headed by the Grateful Dead’s lead guitarist, vocalist and composer) for the first time in her sophomore year. But it wouldn’t be until Dec. 9, 1993, at the Los Angeles Sports Arena (Deadheads name off each show they attend by exact date and location) that she’d finally reach nirvana.

“The Jerry Band gives you an insight to the Grateful Dead,” Katie says. “But the atmosphere is 10 times better at a Grateful Dead show. It just opened my mind up.” She immediately began collecting bootleg tapes of performances from 1968 to the present. Her zeal extended to amassing any

information or thing on the Dead. She wrote an 11-page report on them for her sophomore English class.

“Seeing the Grateful Dead is just a very spiritual experience,” insists Katie, who’s repeated the experience seven times.

Irvine High junior Josh Baron ascribes this spirituality to the “many good vibes” shared by the crowd. Attending shows, or even listening to a live recording, Josh says, “makes my heart bigger. I’m not so frustrated. I don’t take things so seriously.”

Josh’s bedroom is a sanctuary to all he cherishes: books on everything from Eastern philosophy to the Dead, photographs of friends on their travels to Dead shows, concert ticket stubs, a music collection that boasts about 60 bootleg Dead show tapes. His heroes keep a diligent watch on him from the walls: Jerry Garcia, Andy Warhol, Pablo Picasso, Salvador Dali, and his older brother, who lives in Japan as a jazz musician and Buddhist.

Throwbacks such as a beanbag and incense sticks intensify the groovy feel of the room, which serves as comfortable hangout for him and his friends, but a cordless phone and mini-TV reveal the decade. So does the time he spends talking to fellow Deadheads via the Internet.

*Irvine, where Josh and Katie have lived most of their lives, has “a very high concentration of young Deadheads,” according to Lars Lehtonen, manager of the CD Listening Bar in town. The shop draws a constant flow of fans young and old, Lehtonen says, including parents and their children who shop for albums, posters and other Grateful Dead memorabilia together.

Josh got into the Dead through his parents, an elementary school principal and high school teacher, who saw the group a couple of times in the ‘70s. His dad took him to see the Jerry Garcia Band in his freshman year along with their neighbors, Jeff Fliegler and his father. Jeff, a senior at University High and Josh’s friend since third grade, got hooked on the band by way of a compact disc mail-order club in junior high.

Seeing the “Jerry Band” still rides high in their memories, despite having lived through the ultimate experience with the Grateful Dead several times since. (For the record, their first gig was Dec. 10, 1993, L.A. Sports Arena.)

Front man Garcia has long been held like a guru or respected uncle, a sentiment that has not been lost among new Deadheads such as Jeff and Josh, who talk about Garcia’s recent marriage like it was family gossip.

Cynics might scoff at designer products like Garcia’s necktie series featuring his artwork or Ben & Jerry’s ice-cream flavor Cherry Garcia. But most Deadheads eat this stuff up--especially when half of the royalties from the ice cream go to the Rex Foundation, the band’s charitable group, which donates nearly a \$1 million a year to mostly small organizations and obscure artists. And the ties have been welcomed by professional Deadheads and folks like Josh who have occasions when they *have* to don a suit.

It’s Garcia’s sometimes precarious health that keeps many Deadheads like Katie fretting over whether he’ll stay around long enough to someday sing for her children. In the meantime, she plans on touring with the band after she graduates in June.

For Jeff, the harsh realization comes “when Jerry forgets words. You think, dude, this guy’s pretty old. But he’s got such a presence it doesn’t matter. I don’t know what band I’ll be into when there’s no Grateful Dead.”

*Though such a day remains far off for now, in the meantime, surrogate bands are cropping up complete with their own hippie-like following, such as the Vermont-based Phish. The band claims thousands of Phishheads, including a few dozen who travel with them. Josh, Jeff, Katie and their friend, Irvine High senior Tim Steele, attended last month’s sold-out Phish concert at the Santa Monica Civic Auditorium. Despite their enthusiasm for the critically acclaimed group, “nothing can duplicate the original Grateful Dead experience,” says Tim, 18.

Funny remark coming from a guy who used to razz Josh in their Global Science class that pop wonder Tiffany wrote the Grateful Dead’s music. That was before he actually heard them and before “the Vegas trip.”

June 25, 1994, remembers Tim, was the day he was reborn in Sin City. He and Josh, Jeff and two other friends trekked to Las Vegas (Katie met up with them there) and along with thousands of other Deadheads basked in the insufferable heat and choking dust and found heaven in hell.

“It was unbelievable,” recalls Tim, who still listens to Fugazi and other punk acts but prefers a live recording of the Dead’s “Fire on the Mountain” before running. Trying to explain the appeal of the Dead’s ever-improvisational live jams, Tim concludes it’s the music’s organic quality of being real and dynamic like a breathing entity.

“Once you have a Grateful Dead experience,” Jeff says, “it stays with you forever. There’s something about the atmosphere at a Grateful Dead show. Everyone’s really nice to everyone. It’s overwhelming. When you’re 17 and you can hang out and relate with someone who’s 50--that’s a weird experience . . . in a good way.”

Consider the golden rule that things will always work out in this scene because of the goodwill among “family” members.

An integral part of this generous culture are the “miracles,” extra tickets handed out for free or swapped for anything from beads to a ride home.

At the Dec. 19 L.A. Sports Arena show last year, two of Katie’s friends discovered they had lost their tickets, or left them somewhere. They assumed the customary stance of walking around with a finger pointing upward and wished for a miracle. Instead, they found an envelope with three tickets. They waited and when no one claimed it (Katie promises they did this), they took two for themselves and granted a miracle to another seeker.

Tim and a few other friends drove all night to see the Dead in Oakland in December, not knowing anyone in the area or where they would stay the weekend. After snoozing a few hours in their car in a Safeway parking lot, they met up with some out-of-town Deadheads and hooked up with them at a Berkeley co-op house full of affable strangers.

This kind of fellowship, Tim says, “gives me hope that our society isn’t really that messed up. It makes me believe that there’s people that are trying to get along.”

* *The Scene is a weekly look at the trends and lifestyles of Orange County high schoolers.*

